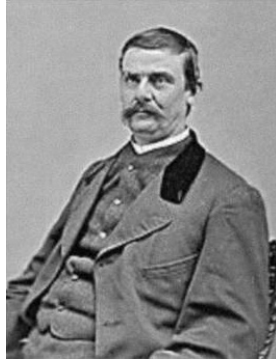


Final days of the Confederacy

This is an excerpt from *CSA, Battles and*

When General Lee began his retreat from General John Echols (Photo at right) was in South-western Virginia. Under him were General of Colonels Trigg and Preston, between 4,000 of cavalry, about 2,200 men, commanded by Cosby, Colonel Giltner and myself.



Leaders by General Basil W. Duke

Richmond and Petersburg Brigadier command of the Department of Wharton's division and the brigades and 5,000 infantry and four brigades Brigadier Generals Vaughn and

There was also attached to the departmental well-equipped battalion of artillery. On the 2nd orders looking to a junction of his forces with those of General Lee. Marching almost constantly, by day and night, General Echols reached Christiansburg on the 10th and concentrated his entire command there. He was confident that he would be able, within a few days, to join Lee somewhere to the southwest of Richmond, most probably in the vicinity of Danville.

command Major Page's unusually day of April, General Echols issued

The command had halted for the night. General Echols and I were dismounted and standing upon the turnpike surrounded by the soldiers. Just then Lieutenant James B. Clay, who had been sent ahead three days before to gain information, galloped up and handed General Echols a dispatch.

The latter's face flushed and then grew deadly pale. The dispatch was from General Lomax, and in these words: "General Lee surrendered this morning at or near Appomattox Court House. I am trying with my own division and the remnants of Fitz Lee's and Rosser's divisions to arrange to make a junction with you."

After a brief conference we agreed that the news should be concealed from the men until the next day, if possible, and communicated that night only to the brigade and regimental commanders. We hoped that some plan might be devised which would enable us to hold the troops together until we could learn what policy would be pursued by Mr. Davis, and whether it would be our duty to endeavor to join General Johnston. To conceal such a fact when even one man was aware of it was impossible. Before we had concluded our brief conversation, we knew from the hum and stir in the anxious, dark-browed crowds nearest us, from excitement which soon grew almost to tumult, that the terrible tidings had gotten abroad. That night no man slept. Strange as the declaration may sound now, there was not one of the 6,000 or 7,000 then gathered at Christiansburg who had entertained the slightest thought that such an event could happen, and, doubtless, that feeling pervaded the ranks of the Confederacy.

We knew that the heroic army which had so long defended Richmond was in retreat. We knew that its operations could no longer be conducted upon the methods which support regular warfare, and that everything necessary to maintain its efficiency was lost. We could hazard no conjecture as to what would be done; yet, that the Army of Northern Virginia, with Lee at its head, would ever surrender had never entered our minds. Therefore, the indescribable consternation and amazement which spread like a conflagration through the ranks when the thing was told can only be imagined by one who has had a similar experience.

During all that night, officers and men were congregated in groups and crowds discussing the news, and it was curious to observe how the training and discipline of veteran soldiers were manifested even amid all this deep feeling and wild excitement.

There was not one act of violence, not a harsh or insulting word spoken; the officers were treated with the same respect which they had previously received and although many of the infantrymen who lived in that part of Virginia went off that night without leave and returned to their homes, none who remained were insubordinate or failed to obey orders with alacrity. Great fires were lighted.

Every group had its orators, who, succeeding each other, spoke continuously. Every conceivable suggestion was offered. Some advocated a guerrilla warfare; some proposed marching to the trans-Mississippi, and thence to Mexico. The more practical and reasonable, of course, proposed that an effort to join General Johnston should immediately be made. Many, doubtless, thought of surrender, but I do not remember to have heard it mentioned.

On the next day, General Echols convened a council of war composed of his brigade commanders. He proposed that the men of the infantry commands should be furloughed for 60 days, at the expiration of which time, if the Confederacy survived, they might possibly be returned to the service. The infantry commanders approved of this policy, and it was adopted. General Echols then requested the officers commanding the cavalry brigades to give expression to their views.

General Cosby and Colonel Giltner frankly declared their conviction that further resistance was impossible, and that it was their duty to lose no time in making the best terms possible for their men. They expressed a determination to march to Kentucky and immediately surrender. General Vaughn and I believed that we were allowed no option in such a matter, but that, notwithstanding the great disaster of which we had just learned, we were not absolved from our military allegiance.

We thought it clearly our duty to attempt to join General Johnston, and to put off surrender as long as the Confederate Government had an organized force in the field. We expressed ourselves ready to obey any order General Echols might issue.

For my own part, I was convinced that all of the troops there would rather have their record protected than their safety consulted.

General Echols verbally notified each brigade commander of cavalry that he would be expected to take his brigade to General Johnston and said that a written order to march that evening would be delivered to each.

The infantry ostensibly was furloughed. Virtually, it was disbanded in accordance with this program. The guns of Page's batteries were spiked and the carriages burned. The artillery horses and several hundred mules taken from the large wagon-train, which was also abandoned, were turned over to my brigade that I might mount my men, for our horses had mostly been sent to North Carolina for the winter and had not been brought back.

I had been joined at Christiansburg by a detachment of paroled prisoners of John Morgan's old command. I permitted as many of them as I could mount to accompany me and armed them with rifles left by the disbanded infantrymen. I was compelled peremptorily to order a very considerable number of these paroled men to remain in a camp established in the vicinity of Christiansburg. They were anxious to follow on foot.

Late on the evening of the 11th, General Echols, at the head of Vaughn's brigade and mine, the latter on muleback, began the march toward North Carolina, which was to close with the final surrender of the last Confederate organization east of the Mississippi River. The rain was pouring in torrents.

On the next day, 90 men of Colonel Giltner's brigade, under Lieutenant-Colonel George Dimond, overtook us. They had learned, after our departure, of General Echols's determination to join General Johnston.

As we approached the North Carolina border, we heard frequent rumors that a large force of Federal cavalry was in the vicinity, prepared to contest our progress. The point at which it was supposed we would encounter them, and where collision would be most dangerous to us, was Fancy Gap, which, however, we passed in safety.

On the second day after entering North Carolina, we crossed the Yadkin River, and on the evening of the next day thereafter reached Statesville. Here General Echols left us in order to proceed more promptly to General Johnston, who was supposed to be at Salisbury. Vaughn marched in the direction of Lincolnton, where I expected to find my horses and the detail, under Colonel Napier, which I had sent in charge of them to their winter quarters in that vicinity. Crossing the Catawba River on the top of the covered railroad bridge, I pushed on rapidly.

I had obtained credible information that the Federal cavalry under Stoneman was now certainly very near and also marching in the direction of Lincolnton. I was very anxious to get there first, for I feared that if the enemy anticipated me, the horses and guard would either be captured or driven so far away as to be entirely out of my reach. Early in the afternoon, I discovered unmistakable indications that the enemy was close at hand and found that he was moving upon another main road to Lincolnton, nearly parallel with that which I was pursuing and some three miles distant.

My scouts began fighting with his upon every by-road which connected our respective routes; and I learned, to my great chagrin and discomfort, that my men were not meeting with the success in that sort of combat to which they were accustomed, and which an unusual amount of experience in it might entitle them to expect. They were constantly driven in upon the column and showed a reluctance to fight amounting almost to demoralization. Every man whom I questioned laid the blame in the most emphatic manner on his "damned mule." All declared that these animals were prejudiced against advancing or standing in any decent fashion.

I sent a party of some 25 or 30, mounted on horses and better equipped than the others, with instructions to get into Lincolnton before the enemy and communicate with Colonel Napier. However, when I had come within three miles of the place, about sunset, I met this party retiring before a very much larger body of Federals.

To countermarch would have destroyed the morale of the men; and if I had been attacked in rear, my column would have dissolved in utter rout. Fortunately, I had learned that a road, or trail off to the left near this point which led to other paths and to the main road from Lincolnton to Charlotte. I turned into this road. Procuring guides, I marched some 15 miles and reached the Charlotte road late in the night.

At Charlotte, where we arrived the same day, we found General Ferguson's brigade of cavalry. The town was also crowded with paroled soldiers of army and refugee officials from Richmond. On the next day Mr. Davis arrived, escorted by the cavalry brigades of General Dibrell of Tennessee, and Colonel W. C. P. Breckinridge of Kentucky.

In response to the greeting received from the citizens and soldiery, Mr. Davis made a speech which has been the subject of much comment, then and since. I heard it and remember nothing said by him that could warrant much either of commendation or criticism. In the course of his remarks a dispatch was handed him by some gentleman in the crowd, who, I have been told since, was the mayor of Charlotte. It announced the assassination of Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Davis read it aloud, making scarcely any comment upon it at all. He certainly used no unkind language, nor did he display any feeling of exultation. The impression produced on my mind by his manner and few words was that he did not credit the statement.

General John C. Breckinridge, who was then Secretary of War, had not accompanied Mr. Davis to Charlotte, but had gone to General Johnston's headquarters at Greensboro and was assisting in the negotiations between Johnston and Sherman.

When General Breckinridge reached Charlotte, about two days after Mr. Davis's arrival, he was under the impression that the cartel he had helped to frame would be ratified by the Federal Government and carried into

effect. I saw him and had a long conversation with him immediately upon his arrival. He was in cheerful spirits and seemed to think the terms obtained some mitigation of the sting of defeat and submission.

In the afternoon of that day, General Johnston telegraphed that the authorities at Washington refused to recognize the terms upon which he and Sherman had agreed, that the armistice had been broken off, and that he would surrender, virtually, upon any terms offered him. Upon the receipt of this intelligence, Mr. Davis resolved at once to leave Charlotte and attempt to march, with all the troops willing to follow him, to Generals Taylor and Forrest, who were somewhere in Alabama.

He was accompanied by the members of his cabinet and his staff, in which General Bragg was included. The brigades of Ferguson, Dibrell, Breckinridge and mine composed his escort, the whole force under the command of General Breckinridge.

We made not more than 12 or 15 miles daily. To the cavalry, this slow progress was harassing and a little demoralizing withal, as the men were inclined to believe that this meant irresolution and doubt on the part of their leaders. They were more especially of this opinion because a large body of Federal cavalry, the same which I had encountered at Lincolnton, were marching some ten or fifteen miles distant on our right flank, keeping pace with us and evidently closely observing our movements. At Unionville, I found Colonel Napier, with nearly all of the horses of my brigade and some 70 or 80 men.

Mr. Davis, General Breckinridge, Mr. Benjamin and the other cabinet and staff officers mingled and talked freely with the men upon this march, and the effect was excellent. It was the general opinion that Mr. Davis could escape if he would, but that was largely induced by the knowledge that extraordinary efforts would be made to prevent his falling into the hands of the enemy. We all felt confident that General Breckinridge would not be made prisoner if duty permitted him to attempt escape. As Judge Reagan had been a frontiersman and, as we understood, a Texas Ranger, the men thought his chances good; but all believed that Benjamin would surely be caught, and all deplored it, for he had made himself exceedingly popular. One morning, he suddenly disappeared. When I next heard of him, he was in England.

At Abbeville, South Carolina, Mr. Davis held a conference with the officers in command of the troops composing his escort, which he himself characterized as a council of war, and which I may be justified, therefore, in so designating. It was, perhaps, the last Confederate council of war held east of the Mississippi River, certainly the last in which Mr. Davis participated. We had gone into camp in the vicinity of the little town, and, although becoming quite anxious to understand what was going to be done, we were expecting no immediate solution of the problem. We were all convinced that the best we could hope to do was to get Mr. Davis safely out of the country and then obtain such terms as had been given General Johnston's army, or, failing in that, make way to the trans-Mississippi.

The five brigade commanders (S. W. Ferguson, George G. Dibrell, J.C. Vaughn, Basil W. Duke and W. C. P. Breckinridge) each received an order notifying him to attend at the private residence in Abbeville, where Mr. Davis had made his headquarters, about 4:00 of that afternoon. We were shown into a room where we found Mr. Davis and Generals Breckinridge and Bragg. No one else was present. I had never seen Mr. Davis look better or show to better advantage. He seemed in excellent spirits and humor; and the union of dignity, graceful affability and decision, which made his manner usually so striking, was very marked in his reception of us.

After some conversation of a general nature, he said: "It is time, that we adopt some definite plan upon which the further prosecution of our struggle shall be conducted. I have summoned you for consultation. I feel that I ought to do nothing now without the advice of my military chiefs." He smiled rather archly as he used this expression, and we could not help thinking that such a term addressed to a handful of brigadiers, commanding altogether barely 3,000, by one who so recently had been the master of legions was a pleasantry, yet he said it in a way that made it a compliment.

After we had each given, at his request, a statement of the equipment and condition of our respective commands, Mr. Davis proceeded to declare his conviction that the cause was not lost any more than Hope of American liberty was gone amid the sorest trials and most disheartening reverses of the Revolutionary struggle; but that energy, courage and constancy might yet save all.

" Even," he said, "if the troops now with me be all that I can for the present rely on, 3,000 brave men are enough for a nucleus around which the whole people will rally when the panic which now afflicts them has passed away." He then asked that we should make suggestions in regard to the future conduct of the war.

We looked at each other in amazement and with a feeling a little akin to trepidation, for we hardly knew how we should give expression to views diametrically opposed to those he had uttered.

Our respect for Mr. Davis approached veneration, and, notwithstanding the total dissent we felt and were obliged to announce to the program he had indicated, that respect was rather increased than diminished by what he had said.

I do not remember who spoke first, but we all expressed the same opinion. We told him frankly that the events of the last few days had removed from our minds all idea or hope that a prolongation of the contest was possible. The people were not panic stricken but broken down and worn out. Since all means of supporting warfare were gone, it would be a cruel injustice to the people of the South.

We would be compelled to live on a country already impoverished and would invite its further devastation. We urged that we would be doing a wrong to our men if we persuaded them to such a course; for if they persisted in a conflict so hopeless, they would be treated as brigands and would forfeit all chance of returning to their homes.

He asked why then we were still in the field. We answered that we were desirous of affording him an opportunity of escaping the degradation of capture, and perhaps a fate which would be direr to the people than even to himself in still more embittering the feeling between the North and South. We said that we would ask our men to follow us until his safety was assured and would risk them in battle for that purpose but would not fire another shot in an effort to continue hostilities.

He declared, abruptly, that he would listen to no suggestion which regarded only his own safety.

He appealed eloquently to every sentiment and reminiscence that might be supposed to move a Southern soldier and urged us to accept his views.

We remained silent, for our convictions were unshaken. We felt responsible for the future welfare of the men who had so heroically followed us, and the painful point had been reached, when to speak again in opposition to all that he urged would have approached altercation. For some minutes not a word was spoken. Then Mr. Davis rose and ejaculated bitterly that all was indeed lost. He had become very pallid, and he walked so feebly as he proceeded to leave the room that General Breckinridge stepped hastily up and offered his arm.

I have undertaken to narrate very briefly what occurred in a conference which lasted for two or three hours. I believe that I have accurately given the substance of what was said; and that where I have put what was said by Mr. Davis in quotation marks, I have correctly reproduced it, or very nearly so.

Generals Breckinridge and Bragg took no part in the discussion. After Mr. Davis retired, both, however, assured us of their hearty approval of the position we had taken. They had forborne to say anything, because not immediately in command of the troops and not supposed, therefore, to know their sentiments so well as W€ did. But they promised to urge upon Mr. Davis the necessity and propriety of endeavoring without further delay to get out of the country and not permit other and serious complications to be produced by his capture and imprisonment, and perhaps execution.

It was determined that we should resume our march that night for Washington, Georgia, one or two days' march distant, and orders were issued by General Breckinridge to move at midnight. About 10:00 p.m., I received a message from General Breckinridge that he desired to see me immediately. I went to his quarters, and he informed me that the treasure which had been brought from Richmond was at the railroad station, and that it was necessary to provide for its removal and transportation. He instructed me to procure a sufficient number of wagons to remove it and to detail a guard of 50 men under a field officer for its protection. He further informed me that there was between 500,000 and 600,000 thousand in specie -- he did not know the exact amount - the greater part gold. I must, he said, personally superintend its transfer from the cars to the wagons.

This was not a very agreeable duty. I represented that if no one knew just what sum of money was there, it was rather an unpleasant responsibility to impose on the officer who was to take charge of it. I would have no opportunity to count it, nor any means of ascertaining whether the entire amount was turned over to me. He responded that all that had been considered and bade me proceed to obey the order.

I detailed 50 picked men as guard and put them under command of Colonel Theophilus Steele and four of my best subalterns. I obtained six wagons and began at once the task of removing the treasure.

It was in charge of some of the former treasury clerks and was packed in money-belts, shot-bags, a few small iron chests and all sorts of boxes, some of them of the frailest description. In this shape, I found it loaded in open box-cars. I stationed sentries at the doors and rummaging through the cars by the faint light of a few tallow candles gathered up all that was shown me or that I could find. Rather more than an hour was consumed in making the transfer from the cars to the wagons, and after the latter had been started off and had gotten half a mile away, Lieutenant John B. Cole, one of the officers of the guard, rode up to me with a pine box, which may have held two or three thousand dollars in gold, on the pommel. He had remained after the others had left and ferreting about in a car which we thought we had thoroughly searched had discovered this box stuck in a corner and closely covered up with a piece of sacking.

On the next day, General Breckinridge directed me to increase the guard to 200 men and take charge of it in person. I suggested that instead of composing it entirely of men from my brigade, it should be constituted of details from all five. I thought this the best plan to allay any feeling of jealousy that might arise and insure a more perfect vigilance, as I felt persuaded that these details would all carefully watch each other. My suggestion was adopted. Nearly the entire guard was kept constantly on duty, day and night, and a majority of the whole escort was usually about the wagons at every halt, closely inspecting the guard.

At the Savannah River, Mr. Davis ordered that the silver coin, amounting to eight or ten thousand dollars, be paid to the troops in partial discharge of the arrears of pay due them. The quartermasters of the several brigades were engaged during the entire night in counting out the money, and, until early dawn, a throng of soldiers surrounded the little cabin where they were dividing the pile into their respective quotas.

The sight of so much money seemed to banish sleep. My brigade received \$32.00 per capita, officers and men sharing alike. General Breckinridge was paid that sum and, for the purpose, was borne on the roll of the brigade.

On the next day, at Washington, Georgia, I turned over the residue of the treasure to Mr. M. H. Clarke, Acting Treasurer of the Confederate States, and experienced a feeling of great relief.

Mr. Davis, having apparently yielded to the advice pressed upon him, that he should endeavor to escape, started off with a select party of 20, commanded by Captain Given Campbell, of Kentucky, one of the most gallant and intelligent officers in the service. Escort and commander had been picked as men who could be relied on in any emergency, and there is no doubt in my mind that if Mr. Davis had really attempted to get away or reach the trans-Mississippi, this escort would have exhausted every expedient their experience could have suggested, and, if necessary, fought to the death to accomplish his purpose.

I have never believed, however, that Mr. Davis really meant or desired to escape after he became convinced that all was lost. I think that, wearied by the importunity with which the request was urged, he seemingly consented, intending to put himself in the way of being captured. I am convinced that he quitted the main body of the troops that they might have an opportunity to surrender before it was too late for surrender upon terms, and that he was resolved that the small escort sent with him should encounter no risk in his behalf. I can account for his conduct upon no other hypothesis. He well knew - and he was urgently advised - that his only chance of escape was in rapid and continuous movement. He and his party were admirably mounted and could easily have outridden the pursuit of any party they were not strong enough to fight. Therefore, when he deliberately procrastinated as he did, when the fact of his presence in that vicinity was so public, and in the face of the effort that would certainly be made by the Federal forces to secure his person, I can only believe that he had resolved not to escape.

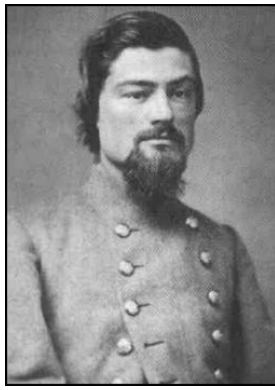
Immediately after Mr. Davis's departure, the greater portion of the troops was notified that their services would be no longer needed and were given a formal discharge. Their officers made arrangements for their prompt surrender. General Breckinridge requested Colonel W. C. P. Breckinridge and myself to hold a body of our men together for two or three days, and marching in a direction different from that Mr. Davis had taken, divert attention as from his movements.

We accordingly marched with 350 men of our respective brigades toward Woodstock, or Woodville, I do not certainly remember the name. I moved upon one road; Colonel Breckinridge, with whom the general was, upon another. We were to meet at the point I have mentioned.

I arrived first and halted to await the others. I found that a considerable force of Federal cavalry was just to the west of the place and not more than three miles distant. The officer in command notified me in very courteous terms that he would not attack unless I proceeded toward the west, in which event he said he would, very much to his regret, be compelled to use violence. He said that he hoped I would think proper to surrender, as further bloodshed was useless and wrong; but that he would not undertake to hasten the matter. I responded that I appreciated his sentiments and situation, and that I would give the matter of surrender immediate and careful consideration.

That evening Colonel Breckinridge arrived. He had encountered a body of Federals, who had made to him almost the identical statement the officer in my front had addressed to me. He had parleyed with them long enough to enable General Breckinridge, with one or two officers who were to accompany him in his effort to escape, to get far enough away to elude pursuit, and then, telling them where he wished to go, was allowed to march by upon the same road occupied by the Federal column.

The men of the previously hostile hosts cheered each other as they passed, and the Yanks shouted, "You Rebs better go home and stop this nonsense; we don't want to hurt each other!" The colonel brought an earnest injunction from General Breckinridge that we should both surrender without delay. We communicated his message to our comrades, and, for us, the long agony was over.



General Basil W. Duke

*By General Basil W. Duke, CSA, Battles and Leaders, Volume 4, pages 762-766.
The Stainless Banner; Volume 4, Issue 8 October 2013*